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The Gus Arriola Interview

Jul 17, 2012 - by Tom Heintjes

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(Editor's note: This interview was originally published in *Hogan's Alley* #6)



While Gus Arriola's *Gordo* could never claim the prize as Most Misunderstood Comic Strip of its day (that dubious honor must certainly be reserved for *Krazy Kat*), *Gordo* remains an impressive contender for runner-up. During those pre-NAFTA days, when most Anglo-Americans envisioned Mexico as a strange and far-off land peopled by inhabitants preoccupied with siestas and banditry, comic-strip readers found *Gordo* a strange bird indeed. To an audience whose exposure to Mexican culture was largely Cisco Kid films, compared to such WASPy strips as *Blondie*, *Little Orphan Annie* and *Steve Canyon*, *Gordo* must have seemed unintelligible to the average reader, what with its dialect and exotic locales, and later even more so when it delved into pop-art graphics illustrating Mexican culture and traditions. When Arriola's love of puns and wordplay appeared (strips were often signed with

comical pen names such as "Alla Twitter" and "Bea Aware"), the result was a comic strip teeming with personalized whimsy, poetry and graphic expression unseen since George Herriman and, unfortunately for Arriola, almost as unappreciated by the garden-variety newspaper editor. The sentiment is echoed by an anonymous colleague of Gus' from his animation days at MGM who recently said, "I admired Gus' work on *Gordo* a great deal. He worked his tail end off, but the strip never had mass appeal. I always had the feeling I was seeing something created for Gus and a small group of intimates." *Dennis the Menace* creator Hank Ketcham more succinctly analyzed *Gordo* by commenting, "Gus was like Adlai Stevenson. He was the right man for the job, but at the wrong time. Today, the strip would be a big hit."

As the Joanie Mitchell tune goes, it would appear we didn't realize what we had until it was gone, and even dedicated comic-strip aficionados systematically underappraise *Gordo* to the point that it merits the slightest of references in strip histories. The 44-year odyssey of Arriola's stereotypical Mexican bean farmer turned suave romantic taxi driver/poet remains in dire need of reanalysis and, certainly, archival reprinting. Many focus on Arriola's last period during the 1960s and 1970s, which featured highly imaginative graphics heavily laden with vignettes of Mexican and Aztec cultures. Actually, this phase was the last of four quarters forming the entirety of the strip's development. From its debut months before the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941 to the end of the decade, Arriola's animation background is extremely evident in the layout, plots and design of the characters. From the late 1940s to the early 1950s, *Gordo* was actually something of an adventure strip with humorous interludes. The Sunday pages of the 1950s feature far more lithely rendered characters and showcase the children of the strip, almost a Mexican version of *Peanuts* or *Miss Peach*. Finally, the aforementioned pop-art period from the late 1960s to the strip's demise in 1985 when Arriola drew the curtain by having *Gordo*, the ladies' man, propose on bended knee to the widow Gonzales and her agreeing to be his wife.

Today, Gus and his wife, Frances (a former MGM ink-and-paint girl), live quietly on California's Monterey peninsula and are central to Carmel's artistic community. As Arriola's post-*Gordo* artistic stature continues to increase, the strip is only now in some quarters being recognized for



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SOTS set during Reconstruction. A rose-colored glasses take on the post-Civil War South & not unique to Disney 11:48:46 AM

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SOTS was notable chiefly as a technical feat, IMO. Its historical revisionism was unremarkable for its day. 11:28:42 AM

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SOTS is nowhere near BOAN in terms of toxic sociopolitics. Disney glossed over

quite a laugh over that. After that meeting we corresponded and traded originals. I proudly display the *King Aroo* original he hand-colored for me. As you know, Jack went on after he dropped *King Aroo* to illustrate and write some wonderful children's books.

Spend all your money on cool comics stuff in our sister store!



A character sheet from Arriola's animation days.

Province: Besides yourself, Mintz Studios was an incubator for quite a number of developing talents. Jules Engel and Virgil Ross are two that come to mind.

Arriola: There were some famous names there at the time: Irv Spence, Emery Hawkins—of course, one of the greatest of all animators. I don't remember Jules at Mintz. I didn't run into him until our experiences in World War II. In 1936 Mintz was producing *Scrappy* and *Krazy Kat*, and they were doing a lot of Silly



Gordo dailies. (Throughout the interview, click on the art to see enlargements.)

Symphony-type musicals, but I was only there a year.

Province: How did you gravitate to MGM's cartoon studio?

Arriola: Word had gone out that MGM was forming a cartoon unit to do *The Captain and the Kids*, among other things, and that they were hiring artists and writers from all over the country. Eddie Barge, who went on to become one of the great animators of the Tom & Jerry series, was working at Mintz. The whole inbetween department went over there en masse, and about five of us applied for employment at MGM. We were all hired in 1937. I think it was in September that we all went over to MGM.

Province: Friz Freleng briefly left Warner Bros. for MGM to work on *The Captain and the Kids*, which as an animated cartoon did not go over well.

Arriola: I knew Friz at MGM. I never worked with him, but he was a very funny fellow. I knew Milt Gross there as well. He was a crazy New Yorker.

Province: His tenure in animation was brief.

Arriola: Very brief. He tried to do what was just a carry-over of his newspaper style, which just didn't make it. The studio was looking for something new and different, some new discovery. They were trying to bring in new people. They tried Harry Hershfield, who lasted just a few months. They hired Bill [Hanna] and Joe [Barbera], which was probably the best thing they ever did.

Province: You were an inbetweener at Mintz. What did you do at MGM?

Arriola: I inbetweened for about a year, but I really wanted to work on stories. I started to submit material and became an assistant animator to Jack Zander, Dick Bickenbach, Irv Spence—all top animators at the time.

I was a floating assistant animator while all the time contributing material to the story department. After the union came in I was promoted from assistant animator to story-man and worked with Hugh Harman's unit and with Bill Hanna and Joe Barbera's unit on the Tom & Jerry things for a couple of months. I only worked on the first one or two. They had just started Tom & Jerry, as a matter of fact, and Joe did most of his own story-sketching. He would lay out the main positions of the characters for the animation, so he really didn't need a story-sketch man. He was it. I wound up in Rudy Ising's unit working with one of his directors, Jerry Brewer, and his background man, Joseph Smith, a great painter. The three of us had a unit and made several shorts. We had Mary Blair with us for a time. She was a fantastic watercolorist. She could sit down and just do these wonderfully juicy paintings. We made *Bats in the Belfry*, *The First Swallow*, which was about the swallows' return to Capistrano, *The Dance of the Weed*, which was sort of a Disney/Silly Symphony type of thing.

Province: Was *The First Swallow* your concept? Set in Mexican California, was this the beginning of your interest in Latin themes?

Arriola: Not entirely. I designed the swallow and the storyboards, but it was a joint effort by Rudy Ising, Jerry Brewer and myself.

Province: The Harman-Ising films of the late '30s had traces of sophistication quite unlike anything being done at the time.

Arriola: Rudy was a very nice man and commanded respect from everyone. His approach to humor was gentle and very slow. His gags were a little bit more genteel. Hugh Harman was entirely different; at least Rudy could draw a little bit. I always had a hard time understanding how Harman even got into



Original art for the Dec. 24, 1959, Gordo (click to enlarge).

the business. They'd both come from Kansas City at the same time after working with Disney.

Province: *You also met your future wife, Frances, at MGM?*

Arriola: Oh yeah, she worked in ink and paint, and I chased her all over the back lot! The cartoon department was on lot two, and during lunch we used to walk around and look at the sets.

Frances Arriola: They used to cover them with tarps for night scenes, and we weren't supposed to go in there. I went into one, though, and there wasn't anyone around, but I saw a little light underneath. So I pulled it up and took a look in and there were the Marx Brothers playing cards!

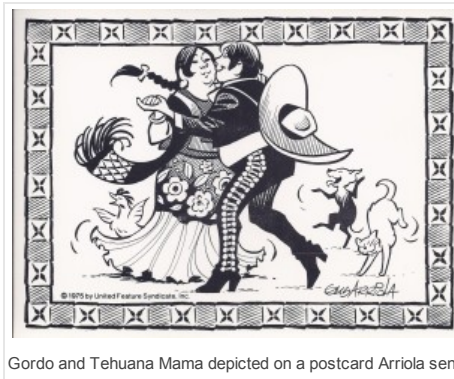
Province: *Did Harpo chase you honking his horn?*

Arriola: They reacted just the way you would expect them to! *[laughter]* Yes!

Province: *Was Fred Quimby at MGM while you were there?*

Arriola: Oh, sure. *[laughter]*

Province: *Why is it whenever I mention him, people laugh?*



Gordo and Tehuana Mama depicted on a postcard Arriola sent.



Arriola: He had an upper plate that was a little loose, and Joe Barbera used to imitate him just mercilessly. Actually, Quimby was very nice to me. I lied to him about how I needed time off to take my father to Mexico or some such thing, and I was really going to New York to try and sell *Gordo*. By golly, he found out about it and called me into the office and said, "I heard you're going to New York to try and sell a strip." I apologized and said that I really shouldn't have done that. Quimby said, "Is it any good?" He said he had a friend who was a west coast representative for United Feature Syndicate who could take a look at it. So he did, and the guy looked in over in Los Angeles. He was a salesman, about as old as Quimby and about as dumb. Quimby called me into his office again and said, "My friend looked at your strip and he doesn't think it's any good!" I told him I would still like to try it out, and he let me go and I sold it to the same syndicate, United

Feature on the east coast. That salesman was looking out for his own job because he didn't think he could sell it.

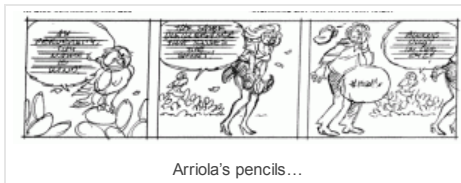
Province: *How did the original Gordo character come about?*

Arriola: While I was designing model sheets at MGM in the story department for Hugh Harman, I was asked to design some characters for a movie short he was making, and I'm not too proud of this, "The Lonesome Stranger"—one of the worst short subjects I think I've ever seen *[laughter]*. He wanted me to design some Mexican bandits. In those days, the terrible stereotyping of characters were always Orientals or Mexicans, Arabs or something. So I designed this bad-looking, big, fat Mexican bandit with a black beard, and like I said I'm not too proud of it. But I kept playing with that character, and later on I cleaned him up and thought maybe I could make him a poor bean farmer and see where that leads me. I remembered stories as a kid about my grandfather and his experiences at his hacienda in Sonora, Mexico. So I thought, why not try a strip about a Mexican farmer? There was nothing like it. So that's where the original thinking started. A couple of years after that I started seriously redesigning *Gordo*.

Province: *When did you leave MGM to start work on Gordo?*

Arriola: It was while I was in Rudy's unit in 1941 that I sold *Gordo* and left the studio in July to start up a backlog of strips. It was a frightening experience because I was alone. When you're working at a studio, there are people all around and you're a coworker. Suddenly you're producing a strip on your own, drawing and writing it. There are no story sessions with fellow writers! It's a terrifying experience, but I was determined to do it. *Gordo* was launched October 16, 1941, if I remember correctly, and you know what happened on December 7, 1941. After just two months of gracing the comic pages, Japan visited us and for the next 10 months we struggled along trying to keep 18 or 19 papers on our list before I went in the service. After Pearl Harbor, they kept us on, but interest was just lost, people weren't looking at the comics. While I was in the Air Force, I got permission from Special Services to do a Sunday page only. So for three and a half years I did a *Gordo* Sunday page that kept it alive with just enough papers to keep it going. I kept in practice doing single gags, not continuity like I was accustomed to doing.

Province: *You've spoken quite highly of Bob Allen, who was an animator at MGM while you were there. Did you admire his work?*



Arriola's pencils...

Arriola: Oh, my gosh, yes. He was our idol. He was a great artist. He designed the model sheets and characters and was just a marvelous man. I talked with him on the phone recently and sent him some things. It was very nice and the first time we'd spoken in 60 years. He later went into advertising with Mel Shaw

from Disney.

Province: And he designed Howdy Doody.

Province: During World War II you served in the First Motion Picture Unit in Hollywood. How did you get that assignment?

Arriola: The "Fum-Pooh" is what we called it. Thank goodness Frances was still working at MGM in the ink-and-paint department and overheard that Rudy Ising had received a commission to form an animation training film unit. The draft was breathing down my neck and I was 1-A. She suggested I go talk to Rudy, so I went. He suggested rather than be drafted, I enlist, and he would try to get me assigned to his unit. That was pretty risky in those days because things were very iffy. But I did, and in October of 1942 I and Ralph Tiller, who was an assistant animator, enlisted and were sent up here to the Presidio in Monterey to be processed where we waited nervously for about a week. Sure enough, orders came through from Washington that we were to be assigned to Major Rudolf Ising's First Motion Picture Unit in Culver City where we reported for duty in late 1942, and that's where we spent the war.

Province: What type of work were you involved in there?

Arriola: We did secret and very complicated training-type films. During that time I learned a lot working with people like Frank Thomas, who had a unit, John Hubley, who went on to become a famous producer, and Bill Hurtz, who went on to work with UPI. The unit was actually formed by General "Hap" Arnold. He wanted to produce his own training films and drew from all the motion pictures studios, writers, directors, artists, cartoonists, everything.

Province: Was animating for the Army much different than animating for the studios?

Arriola: Well, it was the Army. They kept us scared all of the time. Generals would come into the studio and tell us, "You guys are going to smell gun powder yet!" A lot of us never even went through basic training. They didn't bother us too much, but when they did, we told them we were used to taking two to three months to make an animated film, and we had to cut down on that time. One of our films was on the Norden bombsight, and by the time we finished the film, it was obsolete. We had to learn to work faster and that's where limited animation really began. It wasn't the full animation we had been able to do at the studio because of the time element. We did not only animation training films, but three-dimensional landscapes and models for bomb runs. We worked mostly from photographs, and it was fascinating to watch. We worked right up to the very end.

Province: In an early Gordo story, you use the names of two Disney artists, Ward Kimball and Ben Sharpsteen. Were they friends?

Arriola: I don't remember using their names in the strip, but I did meet them briefly, just socially. I didn't see them very often. You must remember that producing a comic strip is a very lonely business and I didn't get out much.



...and the finished drawing.



An Arriola Christmas card



The lovely December 3, 1950, Sunday page.

Province: Many studio artists often did comic-book work for a little extra money. Spence, Dave Tendlar and Walt Clinton did quite a lot. Did you take any side jobs?

Arriola: No, I never did anything on the side like that. I was too busy trying to get the comic strip going.

Province: In the late '30s, Hollywood's animators unionized. Did that affect your career in the business, as it did some others?

Arriola: I remember when the unions came in, and I joined the Screen Cartoonists Guild, but I was only there about three or four months before I left.

Province: How many syndicates looked at Gordo before it was picked up?

Arriola: I recall taking it to three or four syndicates. King Features looked at it. I left it with United because they seemed to be more interested and asked me to leave it so they could look it over some more. They kept it for close to three months, and I got a wire in June of '41 from Mr. George Carlin telling me they were interested in producing the strip. In '41 when I went to New York, some friends told me to stay at the Commodore Hotel, which was on 42nd Street. I did, and got up the next morning. I was bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, and I was going to go out and conquer the cartoon world. I got my portfolio under my arm and went out and hailed a cab, and told the driver "220 East 42nd Street!" which was the United Feature Syndicate address. The taxi driver turned around and looked at me and said [in a New York accent], "Are youse kidd'n bud, dat's across da street!" I was embarrassed, of course, but I said to take me there anyway, and he took me around—up one street and down another—and got me there, and I had to tip him for taking me on a joyride.

Province: *Looking at the strips that were popular at the time—Gasoline Alley, Dick Tracy, Terry and Little Orphan Annie, etc.—comics were very WASPy when you introduced Gordo, which was essentially an ethnic strip.*

Arriola: In the choice of backgrounds, yes—but the content was as American as I could make it.

Province: *Did you have any fears about trying to crack such a white-bread market?*

Arriola: No, I wasn't thinking along those lines at all. I was very green in the business.

Province: *Today, a popular comic strip can be worth millions. What kind of money were you looking at when Gordo began?*

Arriola: In those days you didn't look at the money because you didn't have anything to bargain with. It was 50 percent of the net, and that was based on the number of papers they could sell it to. A big-city paper might pay \$150 a week, and a rural paper, \$3.50 a week.

Province: *The early Gordos remind me very much of the old Amos 'n' Andy television show, where we're invited into a world of people, some of whom happen to be funny, or dramatic; some with great integrity, and so forth. Was social commentary ever an agenda of yours?*



An Arriola Christmas card



An Arriola Christmas card

Arriola: The early Gordos were very stereotypical, yes, and the dialogue was very broken English. A couple of editors started complaining that it was hard to read, and salesmen said it was difficult to sell. So little by little I began clearing up the dialogue and cleaning up the characters myself in order to appeal to a wider audience. When you do a humorous story strip based on human interest you can't help but make social commentary. As

I did different stories and introduced new characters I discovered that some of them were going to have to be a little brighter than my main characters. Gordo changed through the years, as I did, and got a little more information. Once he became a tourist guide, meeting tourists from all over the world, mostly girls, which he specialized in, he changed and became slightly more sophisticated, but not as much as, say, the Poet or other characters that I brought in. When you work on a strip the way I did for 40 years, it's bound to change and so do the characters. The more erudite commentary I would put in the mouths of, say, Bug Rogers, the spider, or the owl, or the worms. I found it easier to make them express ideas than the human characters. It is much easier for animals to comment on the foibles of humans than for humans to do it.

Province: *Was your son named after George Carlin at United Feature Syndicate?*

Arriola: Yes, our son was named after Mr. Carlin. He was the head of UFS, the sole arbiter in taking on Gordo. He became a close friend and mentor.

Province: *Speaking of the animals, it surprises me that there was never any merchandising for Gordo as there were for other UFS strips. They would appear to have been a natural for that type of thing.*

Arriola: In 1948 we ran Gordo's recipe for beans and cheese—which got me into 60 extra papers, by the way. We received a lot of mail on that. An outfit in Texas wanted to produce and market "Gordo's Beans and Cheese," but the stupid syndicate wouldn't go for it. It was always that way—an uphill battle. We could have had the jump on Rosarita with canned refried beans.

Province: *There is a Herriman-esque quality to your animals characters; the language in particular. Was Krazy Kat an influence on your work?*

Arriola: To a large degree, yes—also my time in the animation business, which used a lot of animals. Mostly, it's just a gimmick to try and get as many readers as possible.

Province: *In particular, Bug Rogers, the spider, was featured in a great many of the Sundays, and so*



An Arriola Christmas card

were the two worms.

Arriola: He was a result of the hippie era during the '60s; a nonconformist spider who spun his far-out webs. It was a chance to do more artwork. I remembered reading or hearing somewhere that worms had to stay moist or they would dry out and die, so what could be more natural than two inebriated earthworms? It was fun, I must say.

Province: You took the strip through several stages over the years, from humor to adventure to the stylized graphics. Were you experimenting all along with formulas?

Arriola: Every day was an experiment. When you have deadlines to meet you'll be surprised what you come up with.

Province: Gordo was very autobiographical. A little girl is named after your wife; you've commented that your son, Carlin, was the model for Pepito. Is Gus Arriola Gordo?

Arriola: Yes, I did use a lot from our son Carlin when he was younger. I used a lot of things he said and as a model. As he grew older I sort of applied his teenage years to Pepito as he grew up—having a rock band and all of that, which I was surrounded by. So I used as much as I could of it. Is Gus Arriola Gordo? I think I'm all of them. I'm the animals, and the poet and the widow Gonzalez. You put a little of yourself into all of your work. Like Gordo, I like to swing in a hammock and smell the roses at this point.

Province: Did you use an assistant on the strip?



An Arriola Christmas card

Arriola: The only time I used an assistant is right after I got out of the Army in 1946. I found it kind of hard to suddenly have to produce six strips and a Sunday page every week and the writing was a little difficult, so I hired my friend Lee Hooper, who had been working at Warner Bros.' animation department. He did my lettering and finished up some of the background inking. I did all the drawing and inking of faces and expressions and Hooper filled in the solid blacks, cleaned up the strip and did the wrapping and the mailing and things like that. I used him for about a year and a half. When I left Los Angeles and went to live in La Jolla, we used to mail the strip back and forth and finally it got to be a little too difficult. I couldn't afford to pay him anymore, and the only way I could get a raise was to let him go. So after a year and a half, I let him go and I produced from there on for the next 44 years.

Province: Many animators who later work in print comics use a lightboard and blue pencil, a holdover from their animation training. Was this true with you as well?

Arriola: For the first few years I drew and inked right on the Strathmore drawing paper. After I met Hank Ketcham, who used to do his final inking on a lightboard, I realized you could get a lot looser by drawing on a tissue, cleaning it up, and then Scotch-taping it on to the drawing paper and inking on the light table. It gives you a lot more freedom.

Province: Did you always write your own gags?

Arriola: Yes. Sometimes I would sit looking out the window for half a day before waiting for inspiration before it would come to me, but you have to do it.

Province: In the '60s you began doing very imaginative and creative graphics in Gordo, which really became a trademark of yours.

Arriola: Yes, and the Sunday splashes were a fun and relaxing change from the continuity daily grind. Response was great, especially from art teachers. I sort of resent the way that color registration has improved immeasurably in the last 10 years since I've left the strip. I used to get a lot of off-registrations. No matter how hard I would try to get a certain look, something would be off. Today the colors are beautiful and done in offset. I often wonder what I could do today with computer coloring—wow!

Province: During your excursions to Mexico, did you carry a sketchbook or make drawings of actual sites to feature in Gordo?

Arriola: I made some sketches in color so I could remember color schemes, but I mostly used my camera.

Province: One of the comics histories describes Gordo as "a pixie-like character reminiscent of Cantinflas." Would you agree with that analysis?

Arriola: Cantinflas was noted for his mime. No, Gordo—if he was designed after anybody, it would have to be Leo Carrillo, one of the early Hollywood comics doing broad Mexican dialect and gags. As a matter of fact, I patterned his physical looks on Leo's early work.

Province: Regarding Leo Carrillo, I was surprised to recently learn that he himself began as a cartoonist.

Arriola: And he had a very successful stage career in New York before he came to Hollywood.

Province: *Did you ever meet him?*

Arriola: We met years later when we were discussing a *Gordo* movie. He wanted to play Gordo, but he was in his 80s and much too old for the part.

Province: *Was he aware that he was the model for the character?*

Arriola: Oh sure—he was delighted and he was always “on” like these old actors are. He was really playing the part while he was talking to me.

Province: *Some popular cartoonists today take sabbaticals from their strips. Do you have any opinions on that practice?*

Arriola: In my years in the business, there was no provision in contracts for any vacations. Comic pages are a very competitive area, and if you disappeared from that page there was someone ready and willing to pop into your place. Editors wouldn't stand for artists taking vacations or sabbaticals because they were a very popular commodity in public demand. In later years, Bill Watterson and Garry Trudeau are the only two I know of that could take a year off and pick up when they got back.

Province: *Do you still receive fan mail about Gordo?*

Arriola: Yes, I still get occasional letters, two or three a month or maybe more from collectors who want drawing or originals. Occasionally I'll receive a request for a drawings with a letter saying how they enjoy *Gordo* in the paper every day. Well, it hasn't run for years, so they're working off a list and I'm just the next name. Now and then I get a letter from someone who remembers practically everything I did, which is very comforting.



An Arriola Christmas card



Arriola's much-requested beans and cheese recipe

Province: *Do you still read the comics?*

Arriola: Yes I read them every day, just the local ones. We don't get too many of them. Of course, the classic *B.C.* I never miss Lynn Johnston's wonderful *For Better or For Worse*; she does a great job and she's a great draftsman. I like Bob Thaves' *Frank and Ernest*, which I think is very funny and I love his cartooning. Bud Blake's *Tiger* I've always enjoyed very much. By and large I deplore the lack of art in comics today. Much of the magic of the early comics is missing in the chicken

scratches I see in some of the papers.

Province: *After writing and drawing and constantly conceiving gags and stories for most of your life, do you still sometimes find yourself writing for Gordo?*

Arriola: I read the papers and go to movies and meet people and sometimes think of things I would like to use. I miss the forum—that's all. I don't miss the slavery of producing the physical strip, but now and then a gag occurs to me and there's no place to use it. So Frances and I have a laugh every morning when we take our walk and we discuss things and toss gags back and forth and we'll say, "Well, that would have been good or fun to do."

Province: *I gleaned from your press package that there was at one time a Gordo film in Mexico.*

Arriola: There was never a film made. A producer-director at Churubusco Studios in Mexico City was a great fan and after many meetings in Mexico and Hollywood was unable to fund it.

Province: *There were rumors of a Gordo film some time ago. Is that still in the works?*

Arriola: A couple of years ago Film Roman was interested in doing a *Gordo* TV show or a movie. The powers in New York decided it wasn't marketable, but with the growing Latin population I find that hard to believe.

Province: *With that in mind, I've often thought that if you wanted to run old strips, you might run it in Spanish with English beneath—the first bilingual comic strip!*

Arriola: Today, yes—I think it would better received today. For one thing, the editors are younger and they understand. My editors were all in their 60s and 70s, and I don't think they ever really understood what I was trying to do. I remembering doing a gag and mentioning a Richter scale. This editor at the syndicate calls me and doesn't know what a Richter scale is! I did another one mentioning Julia Child and got a call. They had never heard of her. Luckily she was on the cover of *Time* that week, and I told him to go down the street to the newsstand and pick up a copy. Can you imagine such a thing?



Province: Do you think your syndicate understand really understood Gordo?

Arriola: They never knew what they had. They didn't know how to promote it and were put off by editor resistance. It wasn't the syndicate as much as the editors of the individual papers who resisted the foreign look and sound of it. Prejudice.

Province: Did you ever encounter any direct racism or feelings of that nature while doing Gordo?

Arriola: No, I just remember some of the salesmen saying it was difficult to sell because it was foreign-looking, and because of that they never really gave it a chance. I think if they had run it for a couple of months they would have a chance to see what it was really like.

Province: Was Gordo syndicated to foreign

countries? What was your circulation?

Arriola: Not really. Just to Mexico and I think I had a paper in Helsinki, Finland, that took the Sunday for years. At its peak I think we were in 250 or 260 papers.

Province: Gordo ran in Mexico?

Arriola: Only in the English-language paper; the *Mexico City News* or *Herald*, I can't remember which. I used to talk to some of the young people who told me they were learning to read English by reading *Gordo* in the newspaper.

Province: Did editors give you problems over your wordplay or puns?

Arriola: Not too much on that, really. I had a standup comedian—a hip cockroach—in the strip for a while, and one editor complained that it wasn't good because the character was high on something. Well, that wasn't it at all. He was singing funny songs that had nothing to do with being high. He was just a good character.

Province: While these editors did not understand your work, your peers certainly did in nominating you for several professional awards for Gordo.

Arriola: The National Cartoonists Society nominated *Gordo* for "Best Humor Strip" in 1956 and 1960. One I enjoyed in 1957 was from the

San Francisco Artist's Club "in recognition of his pioneering in bringing design and color to a new high in the field of newspaper comic strips." I got an Inkpot award later on from the San Diego Comic-Con and then found out they've given out something like 250 of them. If you can draw, you get an award [laughter].

Province: Gordo ceased publication in 1985. Why did you stop doing it?

Arriola: I was tired after 44 years. I also developed a slight tremor. I can still draw, but the pressure caught up with me and it just wasn't fun any more. It was just pure labor sitting down and thinking up new material. Then our son died, and that took a lot of steam out of us as well.

Province: Some of your Gordo Sunday pages are on display in a gallery here on the Monterey Peninsula. Are you selling your originals?

Arriola: I've been selling some of the better—in my opinion—*Gordo* daily and Sunday originals; those that have a little more intricate graphics in them. I sell them in a local gallery here in town, the Carmel Art Association. I've been lucky enough to have fans come in and pay a pretty good price. I won't tell you exactly how much, but they sell for well over \$500.

Province: I'd also like to touch on something I find amusing. As someone who used a talking chihuahua in his comic strip 40 years ago, where do you stand on the controversy about the Taco Bell commercials?



Arriola: I think they are great, I love them! They have that little chihuahua saying "Yo Quiero Taco Bell" [laughter]. It's fantastic!

Province: The first time I saw it I said to my wife, "Gus was doing that 40 years ago!"

Arriola: I don't know why they're objecting. I had

a gag in the strip once where someone suggested Gordo get a pit bull, and he said, "I've got an olive pit bull," which was Señor Dog.

Province: Looking back over your career and everything you have been involved in, what gives you the most personal satisfaction?

Arriola: The strip by far. In animation I was working for other people, and they may not be happy with what I did. You couldn't even sign your name to it. For a long time the public never even knew what people did because there weren't any credits. You were just a cog in a machine in animation, although when I was at MGM it was a very loosely run studio. It became more serious after I left. There were

had a definite ethnic background. Gordo was a Mexican from Mexico. I don't know what the rest of the comics are these days—they aren't called anything. I guess they're just Americans.

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